

KIRKWOOD
A series of short stories

THE MOTHER

“Why couldn’t Amina just get it right?” Poppy thought agitated, as she pushed her daughter’s stroller through Studio City. “She paid her enough, that was for sure.” She turned a sharp left and then right, onto the pristine tree lined streets that bordered the Hollywood Hills.

“I want another fruit snack” her six-year old daughter, Isobel, demanded.

“You know the sugar rule. Only one per day.”

“But I’m hungry.” Isobel complained, kicking her feet, causing the stroller to buck back and forth.

“How about something healthy?” Poppy said, stopping and grabbing a Backyardigan’s lunch pack from the bottom of the stroller. She opened the pack, pulling out several neatly prepared snacks in recyclable and non PHB plastic containers.

“I don’t want healthy! I want bunny snacks!” Isobel screamed.

Poppy calmly opened one of the containers and waved it in front of her. “Baby carrot sticks. Nice and cold like you like them.”

“No!” Isobel answered, shaking her head.

She grabbed another container, popping the top off. “Ohhhhh...fresh strawberries. Your favorite.” Poppy said in a sweet voice, showing her daughter.

“I don’t like them with the icky tops.”

“Damn it, Amina.” Poppy growled. “You can just eat around the tops” she said, showing Isobel. Poppy bit into one of the strawberries, letting the sweet, organic juice explode into her mouth. “Mmmmmmm. They are so good.” She held one out to her daughter. “You have to try one.”

“No!” yelled Isobel, swatting at the berry and hitting the whole container out of Poppy’s hand. A dozen beautiful and expensive strawberries fell into the dirt.

“ISOBEL!” Poppy yelled savagely into her daughter’s face. “LOOK WHAT YOU’VE DONE!”

The scolding was so loud that it echoed off the back of the hills, disturbing a cluster of crows into the air. Isobel’s feet stopped kicking and her eyes popped open wide in fear.

“Thank god. A moment of peace” thought Poppy, before Isobel’s shock wore off and her shrill crying began.

“You yelled at me!” Isobel’s eyes spilled over with tears and her little body hiccuped with sobs. “You’re a meanie, mommy!”

“God she didn’t feel like dealing with this today”, Poppy thought. “Fine” she said tersely, pulling a handful of strawberry flavored bunny fruit snacks from her purse. “Have them.” She dumped the bunch into her daughter’s lap.

“Bunny snacks!” Isobel squealed delighted, ripping them open and eating them through her snot and tear covered face.

“Why in the hell did she have a child?” Poppy thought as she pushed the stroller again.

It has all seemed so romantic when her husband preposed the idea six years ago. They had already been married five years before her daughter came along and she’d loved that life. Her husband was a successful movie director and Poppy followed him from job to job all over the world, happily skating on his fame and fortune. It never bothered her that she didn’t have a “direction” in life. Frankly, she never really had any aspirations, ever. Nothing had grabbed her interest .

For a brief period, she’d been a model but wasn’t committed to the work. It paid well enough to keep her comfortable, letting her indulge in the lavish lifestyle that she liked. She’d been on a modeling job in Italy when she met her husband. She’d just wrapped up and was getting ready to go back to the U.S. Poppy had been out on a walk, enjoying the culture, the romantic language, the pristine cuts of clothing but not the amazing food. Her diet was severely restricted as a model and she had another job lined up when she got home to New York. She was however, able to drink as much strong, Italian coffee as she like. So..strung up on caffeine and beautiful Venice, Poppy remembered how she’d walked for hours through those streets. She’d come around a corner, minding her own business when she smacked hard into her future husband coming the other way. He got off easy with a bloody nose but she ended up with a terrible black eye. A major problem for a model with a job in a few days. They’d nursed their wounds together in a nearby cafe and she listened to him apologize profusely again and again. His name was Antonio and he was handsome and charming. Italian himself, with a mop of dark curly hair, olive skin and twinkly brown eyes the color of the coffee she’d been drinking all day. He wasn’t particularly tall but that didn’t worry her. At 5’11” herself, Poppy had grown used to dating men her height or smaller.

They spent hours in that cafe. Mostly he talked, she didn’t have much to say. He talked passionately about movies, art, politics and science, more than adequately making up for her lack of passion about any of it. After several calls to her agent, Antonio was able to cancel Poppy’s upcoming modeling job, agreeing to pay for any penalties of a broken contract or missed pay due Poppy. She thought that was a very gentlemanly thing to do.

They spent the next month together in Italy. Falling in love, eating (she’d gained ten pounds that month!) and exploring. He was there, scouting locations for his next movie and Poppy was happy to go along with him and help him.

“Mommy?” Isobel said, interrupting Poppy’s thoughts.

“Yes, honey.”

“My tummy hurts” she groaned.

“That’s what happens to greedy girls who eat too many fruit snacks.”

“Can we go home now?” Isobel whined from her stroller.

“Nope. Your punishment is that you have to go on a really long walk with mommy today.”

“You didn’t tell me that.” Isobel complained.

“Yup. And if you keep complaining, it’s an extra five minutes on our walk.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Your complaining. Five more minutes.”

“But.....”

“You heard the rules.” Poppy answers.

“I miss Amina” grumbled Isobel, sitting back in her stroller.

“Five more minutes” snapped Poppy, feeling the blood rush to her ears at the mention of the nanny.

“Ohhhhhhhh” Isobel whined, popping her thumb into her mouth and going quiet.

“Damned Amina.” Poppy thought. “First the strawberries and now this.”

Ironically, it wasn’t that her daughter liked Amina more than her. What Poppy didn’t like was being held up in competition with the nanny. It made things complicated and irritating. “Of course it’s not Isobel’s fault” Poppy thought. Amina had been her nanny since she was born. Her whole job was to keep Isobel happy and make the days easier for Poppy. “It was all so fake” she thought disgusted. The nanny only played along so that she could keep her job, pay her bills and keep a roof over her own family. She didn’t really care about them.

“Maybe I’ll just fire her” Poppy thought as she pushed the stroller up a steep side road into the Hollywood Hills. “No. That would make her life more of a hell than it already was.” Isobel would never forgive her and she would have to parent day in and day out. The thought of endless hours of catering to her daughter turned Poppy’s stomach.

Antonio was no use. He was hardly around these past few years, jetting off to exotic places without her for work.

“Isobel has school now” he told Poppy. “She has friends. We can’t drag her around wherever.”

“Why not?” she’d ask him. “European families do it all the time.”

“It’s expensive, Poppy.” He told her. “I can’t support two lifestyles for us. It’s either a nice house and a comfortable life in Studio city or a life on the road with me. Not both.”

Poppy had chosen the house and its comforts, but frankly, she wondered if she'd made the right decision. Her husband was hardly home, working job after job to keep her and Isobel in comfort. She resented him for his absence and punished him for not being there with several expensive habits.

"If this was going to be her life now, she might as well enjoy it." Poppy thought. Her trips to the dermatologist and plastic surgeon alone had cost him tens of thousands of dollars.

"Your always beautiful to me" he told her. "No matter what age."

Poppy didn't believe it. His compliments were just his way of trying to get her to stop spending his money. Frankly, she didn't trust anyone these days. Just herself.

"Golden hour" she said out-loud, looking up at the Hollywood Hills sparkling in the late afternoon California sun. It really was beautiful up here above the din of the valley with its traffic and pollution. Poppy took off her large hat and let the warm sun hit her face. "God that felt good." she thought. Her plastic surgeon wouldn't approve but fuck it. Her new brown spots were what kept him in business.

A snore came from the stroller as Isobel slept. It was late for her nap but Poppy wasn't going to ruin these few moments of peace by waking her. Besides, she'd just make Amina stay late tonight helping get Isobel to sleep. As payback for forgetting to cut the tops off the strawberries.

Poppy took a long deep breath filling her lungs with the clear, cool air of the hills. She smelled damp earth, dry oak leaves and a tinge of ozone in the city air. She pushed the stroller deeper into the Hollywood hills. Peacefully winding up twisty roads, her mind wandering to happier days before her daughter was born. A light mist crept its way into the approaching evening air coating everything in a blanket of watery beads. Poppy had worked up quite a sweat pushing the stroller and the mist felt good on her hot skin.

"How long had she been walking?" she thought, peering toward the sky to gage the time. The sun hovered just at the edge of the earth. Only a few minutes before sunset. "Oh well. She'd find her way back." Poppy thought. She just had to look for the twinkly lights of the valley and follow them down back into her miserable life.

"I'm cold, mommy" Isobel whined, waking from her nap.

"The first thing out of her mouth is a complaint" Poppy thought, immediately agitated with her daughter.

"We'll be home soon" she answered.

"I don't like this place, mommy. Why are we here?" Isobel asked, peeking around the corner of the stroller at Poppy, her coffee colored eyes like her father's, clouded with worry.

"Don't be ridiculous. It's beautiful here" answered Poppy.

"I don't like the way it feels" Isobel said, scanning the thick canopy of trees, her head darting this way and that looking for imaginary monsters.

"Stupid child" Poppy thought. "She'd never get a moments peace for the rest of her life."

"There!" Isobel yelled, pointing toward the trees.

"What?" Poppy asked, stopping abruptly, launching her daughter hard against the straps.

"Something" Isobel grumbled, shrinking back under the canopy of her stroller.

"It's probably just a squirrel or a bird." Poppy answered, squinting in the direction her daughter was pointing where a small rustling came from.

"I don't think so, mommy."

A larger rustle shook the bushes to their right. Isobel screeched and started to whimper.

"No more crying" Poppy said, fishing around in her purse for another snack. All she had was a mini hershey bar from ages ago. She pulled it out and handed it to Isobel.

"I'm not hungry" Isobel said meekly.

"Take the chocolate, you spoiled little shit." Poppy snapped at her. Isobel's eyes went wide with fear but they were not because of her mother. Her little mouth opened, her voice frozen and she pointed to something behind Poppy. "What!" Poppy yelled, turning around.

A dark and slippery looking creature was crouched by the tree line. She peered through the evening shadows, trying to get a good look at it. "Probably just a rat" Poppy said out-loud. More rustling came from the bushes and several more creatures emerged. Isobel whimpered.

"Time to go home" Poppy announced, turning the stroller and pointing it in the direction they had just come from. The road was covered in a thick mist and the evening shadows had become near darkness now. Poppy pulled out her phone and turned on the flashlight to see the path ahead. A hundred of those little creatures scurried back from the phone light and into the fog. Poppy felt her first surge of fear rise in her stomach since they'd got there.

"Please mommy. Let's go home now" whimpered Isobel.

"That's what we are doing" Poppy said, lurching the stroller forward and dialing her home number. The phone rang once, twice. "Dammit Amina! Answer the phone." she said out-loud.

"Allo?"

"Amina." Poppy said.

"Ms. Poppy. Where are you? Is Isobel OK?"

“Of course she is.” Poppy snapped. “We just got a little lost on our walk. Can you take the car and pick us up?”

“Where are you?” Amina asked, her voice crackling and dropping from the bad connection.

“I don’t know. Somewhere in the Hollywood hills. I’ll drop you a pin.”

“Amina!” Isobel yelled. “I want Amina!”

“Shut up!” Poppy screamed at her daughter.

“Ms. Poppy. Are you alright?” Amina’s voice crackles.

“What? Yes. Amina? Are you there?” Poppy pushed buttons on the phone, trying to find a better signal. The line went dead. “Dammit.”

“I don’t like this place! I want to go home! I want Amina!” Isobel screamed, in full melt down, sobbing and pushing against the straps of her stroller. Her little voice echoed eerily in the cold air around them.

“God she needed a glass of wine” Poppy thought, pinching the bridge of her nose to stave off a creeping migraine. “Isobel, you need to be quiet. Mommy can’t think.”

“No! No! No! No! No!” Isobel screamed.

“It’s no use” Poppy thought. “She’s never going to shut up.” She fished around in her purse for the painkillers her surgeon had given her after her facelift. She was sure there were a few left and this was one of those time when nobody would judge her for doing otherwise. Just then, something snapped at her ankle. Poppy felt a sharp pain.

“Ouch!” she yipped. She shone the phone light on her leg and a thick trickle of blood ran down her calf. “Great” she thought. “If she’d been bitten by a rat that would mean a trip to the hospital for rabies shots with a screaming Isobel. “This day keeps getting better and better” she said to herself, grabbing a napkin from her purse and pushing it against the bite.

“Ouch!” she yelled, feeling another hot bite on her other ankle. “What the hell?” A trickle of blood ran down her other calf.

“Mommy! Mommy!”

Isobel was really screaming now. Poppy turned her phone toward the front of the stroller and dozens of those little creatures were surrounding her child. They were not rats. They had solid black eyes, sharp teeth and tiny human hands and feet. Poppy had never seen anything like them. They were all perched in a circle looking hungrily at her.

“Stay away from my child!” she screamed, trying to get to Isobel. They scurried quickly between her and her daughter, separating them.

“Mommy!” Isobel yelled, reaching back toward her.

“What do you want!” Poppy screamed madly at them. They didn’t move. They just stared at her with those eyes. “Why can’t you leave us alone?” she asked. They circled Poppy, getting closer and closer, their sharp little teeth peeking out from smooth faces. They didn’t seem to be at all interested in Isobel.

“Get away from me” she begged, stepping backward. “Just get away from me.”

Her foot caught on something behind her and all five foot eleven inches of her went down. The creatures were on her in a second. Nipping and biting in a thousand places.

“So much for the plastic surgery” she thought ,oddly sarcastic, as the smell of her own blood mixed with the mist and the city ozone in her nose.

“Mommy! Mommy! Call Amina! I want Amina!” Isobel screamed, sounding distant in Poppy’s dying ears.

“Of course she wanted Amina” thought Poppy, as the world began to dim around her. Between the love of her father and the overpaid nanny, her daughters future would be fine without her. “Perhaps she’d always known that truth.” she thought.

There was no pain now and Poppy relaxed as her body started to shut down. Isobel’s screaming had finally faded into nothingness. “Peace” thought Poppy and she let the last of her thoughts not be of her daughter but drift to happier days of Italian coffee and finely cut clothing. To the days before she had made the mistake of becoming a mother.

“It was heaven” was the last thing she thought before the creatures dragged her body off into the dark tree line.

Isobel sat unharmed and alone screaming into the sky. She would be found safely strapped in her stroller the next day by the police and her beloved nanny. And, over time, Isobel would forget completely about Poppy as if she never existed in the first place.